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ABSTRACT

An approach to using a student's own birthday as the basis of a library research project for college and high school students is described in this brief article. AUTHOR'S COMMENT (excerpt): I found my students became very excited about a topic that introduced them to the library while exciting their curiosity and interest: to investigate events that occurred on the day they were born. Students begin by reading the "New York Times" the day of and following their birthdays. They isolate three or four news items that interest them, and are ready to begin research. After checking leads in periodical indexes, the card catalog, almanacs, and biographies, students limit themselves to a single topic. Their introduction to the library and its resources becomes a systematic process of discovery. This assignment met several objectives. Students learned to use a variety of resources from the library, following a systematic course of investigation. They learned to limit a topic from materials gathered and to formulate a thesis. They learned about a time in their past lives that is meaningful to the present. But, most importantly, this project satisfed my desire of having a research project that is both relevant and interesting to my students. (KC)

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Investigating Birthdays: A Library Research Project

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Level:

High school and college

Author's Comment

Finding library research topics that are useful yet interesting for students in a two-year college Freshman English class can be a difficult task. Because of the limited interests of many of our students or their weak knowledge of current events and history, the assignments are often artificial, irrelevant, and dull. Most have poor library research skills as well as difficulties in limiting a topic or composing a thesis. However, I've found my students become very excited about a topic that introduced them to the library while exciting their curiosity and interest: to investigate events that occurred on the day they were born. They select a few items in the news on that day—local or world news, society events, sports news, weather items, etc.—and research them forward or backward. Because of the word limit on the assignment (1000-1500), students learn to limit the topic to one aspect of the event, maybe tracing the causes of some incident, or determining the effects of an event in later years. Other topics lend themselves to comparison with current news items. Because of the number of topics in the news on any particular day, students can explore a wide variety of interests, most of which would never have occurred to them before.

Students begin their investigation with a thorough reading of the *New York Times* the day of and following their birthdays. I recommend they also read a news magazine for the week of their birthdays to get an overview of events occurring at the time. Local newspapers are also a good source of topics. When students have isolated 3-4 news items that interest them, they are ready to begin research. After checking leads in periodical indexes, the card catalog, almanacs, and biographies, students limit themselves to a single topic. With a topic selected, they can go on to gather materials and eventually formulate a thesis about the news item they have chosen to work with. Their introduction to the library and its resources is fairly painless since it becomes a systematic process of discovery.

On the day students turn in their research projects, we have a class "birthday party." Students report briefly on the news item occurring on their birthdays that was most interesting as well as other items that caught their interest. Because most of our students are born within a one-to-two year span, we are able to reconstruct the times most of them were being born. Our older students (and the instructor) fill in on events in the forties and fifties. Some students volunteered reminiscences their parents and grandparents had made about the times their children were writing about. Students feel their papers were very special because they deal with birthdays, while, at the same time, they learned about an historical period they had known little about before.

In conclusion, I found this assignment met several objectives. Students learned to use a variety of resources from the library, following a systematic course of investigation. They learned to limit a topic from materials gathered and to formulate a thesis. They learned about a time in their past lives that is meaningful to the present. But, most importantly, this project satisfied my desire of having a research project that is both relevant and interesting to my students. Many commented on how enjoyable the project was because it was personalized. And, for once, I enjoyed reading their papers!

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